

BRITISH YUKON SPRING EXPEDITION 2018

Introduction

This expedition started in October 2017 when the author of this piece (J Wakefield) received an email from his long term climbing partner (G Wilks). The phrase used was “I feel I’ve got one more Yukon trip left in me”.

This prompted a trip down into the cellar of my house, late one stormy night, where I can remember picking up two shiny Petzel Quarks. I put them down in favour of a pair of battered, straight shafted Mountain Technology tools, from about the late 80s. The thought that went through my head was “for something like this, the old weapons are the best” - very Game of Thrones I’m sure you’d agree.

Background

Mount Upton stands at just over 3500 m to the north east of the Logan massif. It is part of the Canadian half of the mighty St Elias range.

It has been climbed once, in 1992 by Barry Blanchard and four others. It was named after one of the original glacier pilots to venture into the Yukon. Apart from this trip, the surrounding glaciers have never been touched.

The aim of this expedition was to climb unclimbed peaks on either side of Upton. We first tried to access the area in 2011, then in 2014. The first attempt was thwarted by high winds that prevented our plane landing. The second attempt was stopped by a burst appendix that stopped us leaving the UK. Accordingly, we felt, in 2018, with a combined age of 116 years, that our moment had truly come.

Approach

We both flew from Heathrow, meeting up in Whitehorse, capital of the Yukon, on 4th May. After the normal round of shopping we both made our way up to the airstrip at Silver City, three hours north of Whitehorse, on the shores of Lake Kluane. As inevitably happens we were unable to fly onto the glacier immediately and spent a couple of days, trudging about in the dust, gazing hopefully up at the sky.

On 8th May, planes, pilots, weather and snow conditions were all in the same place and we were able to fly up onto the Kluane icefield.

Basecamp

We were dropped on our lonely patch of ice in the middle of the afternoon and immediately set about pitching tents and building walls.

The first day (09/05) was spent exploring the glacier on skis and acclimatising. As the weather appeared to be holding, we set off climbing the next day (10/05) up the Scottish lump behind our tents. A long winding 3000 foot couloir, at Scottish grade 2, with a rock step in the middle took us from the glacier floor to a misty, windy summit. The next day the weather closed in but the delights of John Le Carre and Bob Dylan kept us entertained whilst MSR’s expensive fuel kept us fed and watered.



Peak 1, after a lot of snow. Our route follows the obvious left slanting couloir.

12/05 saw us climbing again. A long walk across the glacier took us to a couloir that lead up to a plateau with hard, committing ridges leading off in all directions and a stunning view towards Logan. One solitary summit on the skyline looked to be roughly the highest point so we made that our objective.

Another long slog in the Yukon sun brought us to steep snow slopes. These were climbed to the base of a crumbling rock tower glued together by wet snow. With the assurance of a knotted sling jammed into a crack as a belay, this was climbed. As there was only room for one on the top of our summit, we had to take turns to balance on the top and wave flags and axes in the air.

We grunted and stumbled back down to the tents delighted we had now got two peaks under our belts.



Peak 2 - route takes the left slanting gully, on the far right of the picture. Once on the summit plateau, a walk to the peak in the centre of the photo

13/05 was another storm lashed day that kept us pinned down in tents and thankful that we'd built proper walls.

By the the next day , 14/05, the storm had abated somewhat but it was still snowing. The skies partly cleared in the middle of the morning so we decided to leave and have a good look at the peaks at the southern end of our glacier. We set off towards the peak that I could see out of my tent door every morning, skirting some enormous holes.

By 5.00 p.m., we realised we were making good time and that another summit was possibly within reach. We continued up the north ridge with a steep snow slope on our left and a not quite vertical, very rocky drop on our right. We arrived at another tower of loose rock with layers of snow. Taking care not to kick our mountain into the glacier below, we took turns to tiptoe to the top. Having taken yet more photos of the Logan glacier, we stumbled back to base, very pleased with life.



Peak 3, route takes the ridge in the centre

The next day (17/05) took us by surprise as the storm had now completely gone, leaving Mediterranean weather. On one of the peaks surrounding us, was an elegant snow rib that started on the glacier floor and appeared to give access to the ridge. We set off up this rib but, because we'd been a bit lazy in getting moving, we were soon melting in the heat.

We came down and got a proper Alpine start, the next morning. We made good progress up our rib but as we got near the top, realised it didn't go all the way to the top. There was another rib behind it and slightly higher. The slope linking these two features, which we knew had never been set foot on, was horribly loose. We were desperately close and could see sunlight shining through the cornice, above our heads but we retreated down.



Made two attempts on above peak. From the tents, it looked like the rib on the centre would go all the way to the top – it doesn't.

19/05 saw us attempt our biggest and best mountain, the one I've got a picture of, on my kitchen wall. We crossed the by now, very well wanded glacier towards the peak we had climbed three days previously. After climbing most of the ridge, we then crossed the avalanche prone slope on our left, figuring it would be safest to do it as high as possible, one at a time and without the rope.

We made the ridge on the other side, down climbed the opposite side onto a hanging glacier with enormous holes. We made our way up this until we could get back onto the north ridge of our peak, where our tents came back into view. We followed this, broad at first, becoming narrower, then very narrow at the top. At the top, we could truly see for miles, as the song goes, all the way to where the Logan glacier meets the Walsh.



Peak 4 . After climbing the ridge on the right, the hanging glacier was followed to the summit ridge.

After regaining the tents and celebrating with a brew, there was a discussion about what we were going to do next. In the south western corner of our glacier there was an absolutely stunning peak that we had gazed at longingly each day. However, by this stage, we were physically and emotionally drained. Maybe if we'd had a fit keen youngster with us, we'd had given it a go.

However, as we didn't have one of those, we decided we'd ski out, at least some of the way. The next day, we loaded everything onto sledges and skied down our glacier, round our still unclimbed peak until we were nearly on the Logan glacier. All the way down, we had been watching clouds build up over our heads. A quick phone call to the air strip confirmed what we had thought. Bad weather was definitely coming and we needed to return to our original camp site. The day hadn't been wasted as we'd got some good photos and we'd made a full traverse of our glacier.

The next morning saw the normal nail biting wait for the little plane as the clouds built up and the wind started to blow.

Once safely back on dry land, we had a leisurely trip back to Whitehorse. Here we spent three enjoyable days, seeing one bear and lots of salmon, taking in some world class mountain biking and sampling the delights of the Yukon Brewery.

A nice end to the trip was to be invited to have dinner at the home of Andy Williams. He was one of the original glacier pilots (along with Mr Upton) from back in the day when most of the peaks and glaciers didn't have names - a true Yukon legend. A biopic of his life with, let's say, Jack Nicholson or Anthony Hopkins in the title role, would be a great film. Though he is retired now, his family still run the air strip and the research station at Silver City.

We arrived back in England on 26/05 to find the Peak and the Lakes in the middle of a heatwave. To round off a great little expedition, we even had a World Cup to look forward to.



The peak , immediately to the north of our peak 3, still unclimbed.

It cannot be over emphasised, there is still plenty that is untouched in the Yukon. Whilst the big peaks such as Logan, Kennedy, Hubbard etc get trampled and skied all over, there's still plenty of smaller, elegant mountains out there.

My first recommendation would be to finish what we started. All of our peaks were the first summit on a ridge line. Finishing off any of these ridges would be a great adventure for someone with enough drive, fitness and youth.

Our unclimbed peak (pictured above) would, also be a great objective with no obviously easy ways up. The peaks / long ridge at the north east end of our glacier were climbed / traversed by the team who climbed Upton. However, any of these would still be a first ascent since 1992.

Several miles to the north/west of our base were numerous unclimbed peaks, some rocky and hard, some snowy, and presumably, easier . One particularly caught the eye as, in front of it, on the glacier, was a scaled down smaller version of itself, perfect for warming up on - shades of Tryfan and little Tryfan.

Finally, for the jaded rock jock who's seen and done it all, there was a great little outcrop on the south side of the hanging glacier of our fourth peak.



Looking north from our peak 4, towards Mount Lucania and Steele. Whilst the peaks in cloud in the background have been climbed, everything in the foreground is untouched.



Unclimbed



Unclimbed



Something that has definitely been climbed - Logan

Useful contacts / info.

Whitehorse now has a cheap hostel - Beez Kneez Backpackers Hostel . If you give Sarah enough warning, and money, she will put your expedition in one room. There is also a perfectly good campsite on the edge of town, Robert Service Campground. However it's opening date can vary, dependent on what sort of a winter they've had.

Coast Mountaineering in the town centre is a climbing shop every bit as well stocked, and expensive, as anything you will find in Fort William, Manchester or Chamonix.

The best place to get liquid fuel is the Canadian Tire Company.

We got our satellite phone from Yukon Wide Adventures (Peter) and I would certainly recommend them. Obviously, you do need some sort of communication device. An alternative and much cheaper option is an inreach. You can send messages, up to 150 characters long, to a cell phone or an email. The recipient can see your GPS location and can reply via text. The problem is that, whilst most times, messages can be passed in seconds, if the network is busy, it can take hours. Also, if it was a real emergency I'd probably want to speak to a real person.

If you do go climbing in Kluane, it will be a plane from Icefields Discovery that drops you on the glacier. As mentioned above, this outfit was started by Andy Williams and is now run by his daughter, Sian, with help from other family members. They also have a campsite and lodges, next to the airstrip. It really is worth contacting them early to discuss exactly what your objectives are.

Expedition Accounts

Expenditure

International flights -	1336
Accommodation in Whitehorse -	110
Food / fuel in Whitehorse -	250
Hire of satellite phone and cost of calls -	180
Taxi from Whitehorse to Kluane-	120
Glacier flights-	920
Insurance -	720
Landing fee / permit	84
	3720

Income

MEF grant	2000
Climbers contributions	<u>1720</u>
	3720

All amounts in GB £s

Waste disposal

All rubbish was bagged up, flown out with us, before dumped in the municipal dump at Haines Junction.

Maps



Yukon maps.pdf

Summary

This expedition climbed four peaks, referred to as peaks 1 -4 in the photos . Their heights are 2840 , 2800, 2680 and 2845 respectively.

All were first ascents , climbed Alpine style by both climbers. Peaks 1 -3 are graded AD , peak 4 is AD+.

Glenn and Jonathan would like to thank the MEF for their support not just on this occasion but on previous trips.



Why we all climb